

UNIVERSITY OF MASSACHUSETTS LOWELL
CENTER FOR LOWELL HISTORY
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LOWELL NATIONAL HISTORICAL PARK
UNIVERSITY OF MASSACHUSETTS LOWELL

ETHNOGRAPHIC STUDY OF LOWELL, MA:
MAKING, REMAKING, AND REMAKING AGAIN

INFORMANT: TONY MAI [VIETNAM]
INTERVIEWER: CHRISTOPH STROBEL
DATE: APRIL 24, 2008

C = CHRISTOPH

T = TONY

Tape 08.40

C: If you could just identify yourself, your ethnic background.

T: My name is Tony Mai. I came from Vietnam. I live in Lowell.

C: How did you come here from Vietnam?

T: I came to America as a refugee from Vietnam after the Vietnam War was over. A lot of people left the country in search for freedom. I came to America around 1983. I left Vietnam in 1981.

C: Were you considered part of the group called the “boat people?” Or...?

T: I am the “boat people.”

C: Do you want to talk a little bit about this, or rather not?

T: I can talk about anything. You want me to talk about the journey?

C: Yes, the journey, how you got here.

T: I remember the date. I left Vietnam on December 20, 1981. I crossed the South China Sea. It took us five days and five nights to cross to Malaysia.

C: How was that experience? How was it on the boat?

T: It was a very dangerous journey. We crossed the South China Sea... on a little wooden boat about thirty, thirty feet long, and it carried 73 people exactly. Potential pirate attacks...basically if you're lucky you skip right through. If they get you they can rape the women. They rob what you have. We would bring everything that we own and could carry. It was a horrible experience. But we were lucky. We just skipped right through the whole thing. It took us five days and five nights. We landed in Malaysia on December 26, 1981.

C: Did you have to spend time in the refugee camp there?

T: I stayed in three different places. First they shipped us to an Island in Malaysia called Pulau Bidong. We stayed there waiting for the United Nations to interview us. We did not know... whatever country would be generous enough to accept us. So some would go to Europe, could be Germany, could be France, could be England, could be Sweden, could be anywhere, or to Canada, Australia. I was selected by Americans.... I stayed, let me see, a total in Malaysia and the Island of six months. Then we went to the capital, Kuala Lumpur for a few months. Then they shipped us to the Philippines to learn English. Finally I came to America. Believe it or not, I came to America April 15, 1983. That's the tax day. [C: Laughs] It's so funny for a tax accountant.

C: That is very funny. How old were you then?

T: When I left Vietnam... seventeen... when I came here almost nineteen here.

C: Where did you end up in the United States first? Did you end up straight in Lowell, or did you...?

T: I lived in Chelsea for awhile. I went to high school there for a little bit.... So finally in '86 I moved here to go to the University of Lowell. It was not UMass Lowell then. I stayed in the dorms. I stayed in Leitch Hall across from Fox. After I finished school I thought about going back to Boston. And I realized Boston is not really a hometown. It just was the first place I came to. So I decided to stay in Lowell, work here and live here.

C: So you've been in Lowell then since basically 1986.... Let's talk a little bit about your life in Lowell if you don't mind. Do you own this place?

T: Yes I do own this place.

C: Do you consider yourself part of a Southeast Asian, or Vietnamese neighborhood, or is this more of a mixed neighborhood?

T: It is a mixed neighborhood. I blend in well. We belong to social club, but in terms of living, we don't really belong to any ethnic neighborhood.

C: Is that a Vietnamese Social Club?

T: Yes it is... we have a little club.

C: Can you talk a little bit about that?

T: Every year we gather together. We celebrate the Vietnamese New Year, called TET, (spells) T E T. That creates a strong social bond between us. But we meet once a month sometimes through the church. Have a little fun, talk a little bit. Kids get together, we socialize.

C: Is the church you go to predominantly Vietnamese as well, or is it more mixed?

T: I'm not a member of the church either.

C: So you just meet at the church.

T: I meet the church once a month, usually Saturday evening. This is at Saint Patrick's Church. They have different ethnic groups, different masses, at different times. But I just come to socialize.

C: No, makes sense. So you, you yourself are Buddhist, or?

T: I basically consider myself... well my family is Buddhist.... I am an atheist. I don't belong to any religious organization. No, the reason I go to the church is because they have Vietnamese classes every Saturday. So I bring my children there to learn Vietnamese. After awhile you develop a strong bond and you stay with them.

C: Are those your beautiful kids?

T: Yes, my five children.

C: Oh wow, they're cute.

T: That's their picture too, right there. That's them.

C: Oh great. Can we talk a little bit about them?

T: Oh sure!

C: Is it important for you that your kids learn Vietnamese as part of their Vietnamese identity?

T: Yes, it's very important. I think the reason I'm active in the community is because I want them to know where I came from.... We say [America is] a melting pot, but I don't believe in the melting pot [theory]. I think we are a salad bowl. Each of us has a different flavor. So it is very important for my children to learn Vietnamese. And actually the

oldest one, she's in the eighth grade, and she's been in Vietnamese classes for eight years. And my second one, she is a fourth grader, and she's been in Vietnamese class for four years. And my twins, they are third graders they've been there for three years. And my youngest one is in the first grade, and he's in the Vietnamese class for a year now. So each of them every Saturday they'll go to Vietnamese class... an hour a week... through the school year.

C: Excellent.

T: Because their mother's ethnicity is Cambodian, they also have Cambodian class on Sunday. So my kids are very busy.... Just something that's not required, but we want them to learn. And if they understand the language a little more...they understand where we came from. And the generational gap is lower, and we communicate a little more.

C: That's really interesting. You're married then to a Cambodian woman?

T: Yes.

C: And so both of the languages are emphasized by both parents.

T: Right.

C: Do you speak Vietnamese and Cambodian with your kids around the house too?

T: No, I only speak Vietnamese to my children. I do not speak Cambodian.

C: Does your wife speak Cambodian with them?

T: She does speak Cambodian with them...but they're more comfortable with English.

C: I think it's great that there is this tri-cultural thing going.

T: If you give them the tools they have more advantages in life. If you speak more languages opportunities open up. These are the tools we want to provide for the long run. Even though right now we have to push them... but they will appreciate it in the end, because we are talking about a global economy right now. People travel all over the world to do businesses. So the more languages you speak.... The better off you are.

C: Absolutely.... Does your wife cook Cambodian? Do you cook Vietnamese? Do you shop in, in Cambodian, or Vietnamese stores. Do you go to Vietnamese or Cambodian restaurants?

T: We go to both. Actually Vietnam and Cambodia are very close to each other. Therefore the cuisine is very close. It's a bit different, but not much. Shopping is the same, basically the same groceries.

C: Do you mostly shop at the mainstream supermarkets like Market Basket, or do you go to Cambodian and Vietnamese stores?

T: We go to the supermarkets like Market Basket. Small items like spices that Market Basket doesn't carry... we go somewhere else. But Market Basket got much better prices. We go wherever the lowest price is provided. Especially meat, it doesn't matter which business you go to. Vegetables it's the same.

C: Do you find that Market Baskets here in town accommodate Southeast Asian cuisine?

T: These days yes they do. They carry a lot of items. They have a whole isle of the Asian food. So we can basically get a lot of things from them. Before, they didn't have that kind of food, but right now they are starting to expand.... and only in Lowell. You go to a different market, like Andover, you won't see any kind of those products. They change of course where the money is.

C: Do you work mostly out of your house?

T: Yes.

C: Do you still have relatives back in Vietnam?

T: Right now I have a brother and sister in Vietnam. That's it. But my parents... I sponsored them in 2001. They came already. But I first came with my older brother. And then my youngest brother came later, a year later. So we started with three people. I think my parents might sponsor [my other siblings] to the states. We don't know yet.

C: Do you think that things have gotten more complicated since 9/11?

T: Oh yes. It is complicated. Especially to come and to leave the country... it is very difficult. Especially your passport they check you more and more... the airport, even if you go to the courthouse. Even yesterday, for an audit at the Massachusetts Department of Revenue, it's privately held building. When you come in they check your bags, ID... they scan you through the machine.... Amazing! They didn't have that before.

C: Do you find you get checked more because you're an immigrant, or do you think it's done to everyone?

T: They do it to everybody.

C: Have you tried to sponsor someone since 9/11?

T: No.

C: I wonder if that's getting much harder now too.

T: It's getting hard, but I never did try. My parents came before that.

C: Do you feel like you've changed since you've come to the United States?

T: Of course I've changed a lot... because you basically learn new things. You adopt a new culture. You have to blend in. As a matter of fact, I am much more loyal than most Americans believe it or not. After September 11 I realized, oh my God, this is my homeland. It's my home, period.... I drive an American car. I do not drive imports. I drink American beer. I drink Budweiser. The future of the country is my future my children's future. Economically speaking if the country is better off... than I am better off, if it's going down, I'm going down. Social Security the same thing... if they save, we save.

C: Do you consider yourself Vietnamese American, American, or well obviously not Vietnamese anymore, but do you still consider yourself Vietnamese American, or American, or is it difficult to answer that question?

T: If people ask me I correct people a lot. They say, "You're an Asian" – I say, "Excuse me? I am American." I am American, I by law. The only thing I cannot do is run for the presidential office. Everything else I can do. I can vote. I can do anything I want. I am American, period. You know, ethnically speaking I'm Vietnamese American.

C: Do you still have to financially support your brother and sister back in Vietnam, or are they self sufficient? How do you stay in touch with them too?

T: The telephone is so cheap you can call them up.

C: Do you use phone cards for that?

T: Yes. And I don't support them anymore. I used to when we were younger. They've become self sufficient.

C: Is the economy in Vietnam getting better? Does that explain also why they are more self-sufficient? Are you still interested in what's going on in Vietnam?

T: I'm still reading the news every now and then. The Vietnamese economy got much, much better, because of the Vietnamese American support. They send money back there to their family. That gave a big boost to the economy... helped consumption and investment. So that helped the economy as a whole. So right now they are much better off than they've ever been. They make good money these days. Cost of living... it's expensive... but the life is much better. They get modern accessories just like us. They very much get everything that we have in America, and much cheaper.

C: How frequently do you talk with your siblings there?

T: Since my parents came here. I probably speak to them once or twice a year, but before I called them a lot. I called my parents and I spoke to them too. So right now once, twice a year, Christmas and New Year, that kind of thing.

C: Are they interested in coming to the US, or are they happy in Vietnam?

T: My parents want to bring them to America.... So my parents became American citizens a year and a half ago. They are doing some paperwork to bring them here. I know that it takes seven years or so for children with family. Under eighteen I think within a year or two they can come to America... some law which I barely know.

C: I know, it's hard to keep track. I think that even lawyers that I know have a hard time keeping track of things.... Do you go to Buddhist Temple for the New Year, or on a more regular basis, or do you only do the social club, and do your New Year's celebration that way?

T: The social club here in Lowell and I also go to Lawrence. There's a Buddhist Temple in Lawrence. So once a month or so I go there to see. Plus in my line of work... I need to contact a lot of members in the community to do business. I am there for social but also for business purposes. I can't stay in the office all day long.

C: That makes sense. Have you been back to Vietnam since you left?

T: Since I left in 1981 I went back once, that's it, once.

C: How was that?

T: Before that trip when I talked to people I used the term, "my country," when I referred to Vietnam. After that trip I realized that home is here... America. Vietnam is where I came from, but realized my future is here. After that trip I became more American than ever.... It's funny.... I realized that America is much more comfortable for my lifestyle. The longer you live in America you realize that you know more about American culture, language, laws, business, everything else, and the less you know about where you came from.

C: The Vietnamese Club that you're involved with, they organize the New Year! Do they do other things as well? Are you involved with say the Lowell Folk Festival or the Water Festival maybe?

T: Well I was involved in the Water Festival once. It was 2005 I think.... I [am also] involved as I mentioned before... first Friday of the month at Saint Patrick's Church... with "Family Night." Once a month I go there have a little fun. We also have the Ping Pong Tournament.... I'm not a big fan of it, but I'm still hanging out with them.... Make sure the children practice the language.... So I'm involved a lot with the community, but right now we do... It's an unofficial club where we get together.

C: But it seems to work anyway.

T: Actually people, sometimes they're just lonely. They need to get together and talk.

C: Is your circle of friends predominantly Vietnamese or from all backgrounds? With your wife being Cambodian I imagine there are probably a lot of contacts with Cambodians as well?

T: Basically my friends are of all different ethnic backgrounds. I don't select friends based on their background. But friends that come from the same background, same age, same country, it is easier to talk to them. You can share common things that you went through together, but you also need to learn more from different people. So your circle of friends should consist of people of different backgrounds various groups.

C: Let's talk a little bit of power and politics. Are you registered to vote? I imagine you are.

T: Oh I'm voting. I'm voting now. I always vote. That's the only power I have. To select you know, the members of Congress, or President, or City Councilor.

C: Who do you think has the political power in Lowell? Would you like to see more immigrants on the city council? Like more recent arrivals, Asians, Hispanics, Africans, or does it not matter to you?

T: It matters. I would like to represent the city population.... I do not like all the selected city councilor. Most live right in Belvidere, which is not right. I think they should have it voted by district... the city-wide election. I like to break it down by neighborhood.

C: Do you think there is an effort within communities to have more Southeast Asian candidates running for example? Would you like to see that?

T: I would like to support people who really have a heart and soul to help out.... I would like to see representatives from different ethnic group so they can better serve the population. In the long... maybe ten, twenty years, I'd like to see a different ethnic mayor in there. It will take awhile, but hopefully....

C: Obviously education is important to you. What, what would you like to see your kids accomplish when they grow up?

T: It's like building a house. We lay down the foundation. And the kids can build from there. The first generation is usually not that successful. The second one builds right up to the top.... Basically at this point my goal is to focus on my children's education. One gift I can give to them for life would be their education so they can build from there. So hopefully they become something. We push very hard for their education. That is the ultimate goal. You have so many opportunities in America, especially in Massachusetts.

Famous universities colleges right here within fifty miles from Lowell... so hopefully someday.

C: Have you, have you been to the museums in downtown Lowell?

T: Yes.

C: Is there anything that you would like to see happening... like a better representation of the Vietnamese Community or special exhibits on the Vietnamese? Or are you happy with the way things are?

T: I think what you brought up is a great idea. You know, it's just like Greek used to come here, Italian, French-Canadian, you know, different groups. In the '70s the Hispanics, the '80s the Southeast Asians community, and then the eastern European countries, and then people came from Africa. So we would like to see how the city is made up.... We need to pull the resources together and contribute to community too, to make it happen.

C: So, would you really try to emphasize the community input in these things as well?

T: Of course, because the Vietnamese community is part of the city. We are part of the bigger picture.

C: Final question. If you would have conducted the interview what question do you think I should have asked you that I didn't ask?

T: Hmm... I think the question that is very important.... Okay... "If you lived back in Vietnam, where would you be this day?" So in other words, what opportunity did you have in America compared to Vietnam?

C: How would you answer that question?

T: Is it worth the effort to come here? If I lived in Vietnam, I would not have had the educational opportunities to get where I am right now. I probably would be a laborer rather than a person with a graduate degree. Over ten years ago I got my Masters Degree in Business Administration. So it gave me tremendous opportunity to push. This country gave me so many opportunities in term of educational loans.... I appreciate what I have. So that's a very important question.

C: Mr. Mai, thank you so much.

T: Thank you Christoph.